

Digital Storytelling and the Aesthetics of Defamiliarization

Ignaz Ahmed

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Sikkim Central University
Gangtok, East Sikkim.

Abstract

Storytelling has been an integral part of human communication since the advent of human civilization. We exchange our knowledge and values through different mediums and in different styles through genres such as fables, myths, anecdotes etc, to not only understand the process of the world but also to bring about social change. Storytelling as a means of enhancing the learning process is not a new phenomenon, however as a practice pertaining to creation and handing down tradition/conveying of events, it has multitude of styles and variations.

In recent times, practice of digital storytelling has gained wide currency. Its potential of re-modelling the traditional art of storytelling through use of digital technologies has made it an effective tool for digital humanities. Hypertext, multimedia presentations, video games are some examples of how to tell a story digitally. Digitisation has made storytelling more dynamic in nature as it marks diversion from the traditional interpretive schemata to a configurative one thus de-familiarising the technique of both storytelling and story listening. The concept of defamiliarization – making the familiar unfamiliar – also known as alienation effect was introduced by Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky in 1917. Shklovsky was a proponent of formalist school of literary criticism which advocated the importance of the use of language in the work over the role of context or the author. The aesthetics of defamiliarization calls for making routine activities and transactions unfamiliar or strange so that it can bring out enhanced participation and perception from the user's side. The practice of digital storytelling too, owing to its characteristics of interactivity, non-linearity, sharing and co-creation aims to bring similar user engagement by modifying traditional style of storytelling through creative and critical use of media and narrative styles at its disposal. Through selected examples of digital stories around the globe, the paper aims to explore the working of defamiliarisation effect in the practice of digital storytelling.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, defamiliarization, digital humanities, media, culture

Introduction:

The practice of storytelling is an intrinsic part of our cultural activities. All human expression might not take the form of stories but all stories are in some or other way part of human expression. Prior to the inception of written language, storytelling was mostly either verbal combined with performative elements of gestures and expressions or existed in the form of pictures and sketches inscribed upon stones and walls. The earliest form of writing and writing system evolved out of this pictorial style of representation and can be traced back to the 31st century BC to the Mesopotamian civilization where the first known writing script – Cuneiform, was discovered inscribed upon clay tablets. Gradually over time with the evolution of society and simultaneous developments of writing technology, writing script and linguistic system, the practice of writing was finally institutionalized with the invention of printing press in 14th century by Johann Gutenberg. Developments in technology changed paradigms of interaction. The written documentation of expression not only facilitated archiving and sharing of information but also ensured the mass reach of the written document through mechanical reproduction. With the advent of computers in the mid-20th century, the entire dynamics of dissemination of knowledge, as well as stories, changed. By the 20th century, digital technology brought its own unique features to the interaction process thus altering the existing routine and patterns of communication. The history of storytelling in part is a history of technology. Evolution and diffusion of newer technologies have fostered novel methods of storytelling which in turn have enriched the practice of storytelling by merging the unique features of newer media.

Digital storytelling as an academic discipline was initiated at the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California in the late 1980s by Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley, a nonprofit

community arts organization in Berkeley, California. Digital storytelling uses the earlier existing procedures and mixes it with the newly found technological ones thereby giving rise to a new form which is extremely different from the previous orthodox one. In recent times, practice of digital storytelling has gained wide currency. It's potential of re-modelling the traditional art of storytelling through the use of digital technologies has made it an effective tool for digital humanities. Hypertext, multimedia presentations, video games are some examples of how to tell a story digitally. Digitisation has made storytelling more dynamic in nature as it marks diversion from the traditional interpretive schemata to a configurative one thus de-familiarising the technique of both storytelling and story listening.

The concept of defamiliarization – making the familiar unfamiliar – also known as alienation effect was introduced by Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky in 1917, in his essay *'Art as Technique'*.(Shklovsky p3-5). Shklovsky was a proponent of the formalist school of literary criticism and was a founder of the OPAYAZ group in Russia which advocated the importance of the use of language in the work over the role of context or the author. The aesthetics of defamiliarization calls for making routine activities and transactions unfamiliar so that the resulting feeling of strangeness can make the user more aware and brings out enhanced participation and perception from the user's side. For formalists, the strategy of defamiliarization lied in the structuring of language. Russian Formalism focused on the 'literariness' of the text, this literariness "is a product of a particular use of language, it is our language of the everyday defamiliarized".(Shklovsky) Formalism initially started off as a reaction to symbolism that portrayed mystification of literature whereas formalism had a scientific approach towards literature. Shklovsky writes "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war ... Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony."(Shklovsky).

Shklovsky's idea of 'estrangement' is mostly done in an attempt to make art more artistic by enhancing its significance to the reader. Art is not meant to have a placid effect on the audience, it is rather supposed to awaken them and move them from their comfort zones which can be obtained by using language in a way so as to make ordinary objects look different. This concept was earlier also spoken by Coleridge in his "Biographia Literaria" (1817) where he talks about the creation of unfamiliar using the familiar entities of everyday life with the help of imagination. The strategy of defamiliarization was central to the Brechtian theatre of the 20th century. Bertolt Brecht adopted a similar technique to Shklovsky's 'estrangement' called "alienation effect" in his "Epic Theatre" so as to invigorate the minds of the audience and remove it from a state of being passive viewers and push them towards critical thinking. These strategies had a direct impact on the practice of storytelling as well as the practice of art in general.

In the continual pattern of adaptation, the advent of digital brought a paradigm change in the interaction practice by not only introducing new communication avenues but also through defamiliarizing the existing ones. Digital technology gave rise to 20th century 'new media' which was dependent on computers, programming languages and other digital parameters for their effective functioning. Prime characteristics of new media are of networkedness, non-linearity, interactivity, co-creation, instant feedback and virtual space. These characteristics were markedly different from that of traditional media which is pretty much linear in its access and presentation. The practice of digital storytelling is made possible through the use of new media technology which modifies the traditional style of storytelling through the creative and critical use of media and narrative styles at its disposal. Earliest examples of digital stories includes hypertext fiction and text-based Multi-user Dungeons (MUDs), however with evolution of technology digital storytelling became an

expansive term which not only referred to stories created with the aid of digital tools such as digital movies, websites, interactive novels etc but also stories told within the virtual space and virtual worlds such as in video games, animations and graphic designs.

Technological convergences coupled with tailoring content according to individual's preferences have made new media communicative experiences possible both on an individual and mass level. In the age of information explosion, our interactions have become more non-linear, fragmented and interactive. The novelty in interaction is also due to unfamiliarity on both functional and aesthetic level thus demanding increased user interaction and engagement. Storytelling harnessed these inherent characteristics of digital technology to defamiliarize storytelling strategies. Further, digital technologies rendered the storyworld an open playground where storytelling elements and methods exist in plurality and rather than the question of what to tell it is how to tell. Earlier practices of storytelling primarily relied on the interpretive schemata of participation i.e. the author combined the elements of a storytelling to form a composite whole which in turn was decoded and understood by the reader. Dynamics of digital art and expression, however, is a configurative one where the structures are fluid and arrangement of individual elements matter more than the composite whole. The digital design allows both the creator and the user to have greater control and flexibility over variables of access, sharing and co-creation. Differing from traditional roles of viewer/reader, a user is both part creator and part consumer. Author and content don't enjoy the sole autonomy in the configurative schemata of digital expression. At its core, the practice of storytelling is an iterative process involving telling, interpreting, storing/archiving and then retelling of events. Plot, narratives, characters and space are essential components for construction of a story. Defamiliarization in context of storytelling is about making the process of storytelling unfamiliar by making strange the arrangement and functioning of

above components. The relevance of defamiliarization to storytelling perhaps reflects best in Shklovsky's own statement that "Art is thinking in images" and digital medium has proven itself to be an adept platform to innovatively reproduce, recreate and present data through multiple media. In the following section, I will attempt to elaborate upon my arguments through an analysis of two digital stories.

Digital Story#1 - Bear 71¹

Bear 71 is an interactive documentary based on the story of a grizzly bear in the Banff National Park. She was named Bear 71 by the rangers of the park who collared her when she was three years old, given the name Bear 71 and she had been under surveillance ever since. Bear 71 was directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes. This documentary has the map of the Banff National Park and allows the audience to follow the movements of Bear 71 as well as of various animals in the parks, through GPS trackers. The audience can also view other audience by switching on the webcams of their computers.

Bear 71 investigates the relationship between the human world and the animal world and the story is narrated from the point of view of the bear who is the omniscient narrator. The documentary posits the question of "where the wired world end and the wild world begins?". The line between the animal world and the human world becomes a blur with a great deal of human interference and the animals being tracked all the time, cars moving through the freeways, with parks, five million tourists a year, trains etc. Bear 71 is trapped within all this and she has to suppress her natural instincts and mould herself into this human-driven world. Right from the time that she was trapped and tagged as data she has been careful not to cross the railway lines on her own accord until the end where she loses her life

¹ 'Bear 71' directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes can be viewed at www.bear71.nfb.ca

by getting hit by the train. The story follows the path Bear 71 takes and he moves all around the park, you can also pause and look through other cameras that are provided. You as a viewer are free to choose whether you want to choose your own path or choose the path Bear 71 takes and look around the map. Doing it this way makes the story more than just about a particular bear and portrays the lives of many animals that live in that park.

“Turning the lens of technology on itself, Bear 71 examines the story of the bear through the digital interactive medium, creating a vivid technological interpretation of nature for us to explore, and for the bear to inhabit as she tells her story.” The digital design of the story defamiliarizes the manner in which we access and perceive the stories of wildlife and climate change. New media tools have allowed us to achieve increased diffusion, portability along with simultaneous broadcasting of content through the internet, making the storage and dissemination of stories more fluid in comparison to the traditional modes of storytelling. The footage of Bear 71 and other animals show live movements of the creatures in the park. This interactive element gives you the freedom to go wherever you wish. There is also an option of switching on your webcam and put yourself as an icon within the park and even see others viewing the documentary. This is mostly done in order to make the audience realize what does it feel like to be kept under constant surveillance. However, you tend to get lost in the park like how you would in the normal world and also tend to lose track of Bear 71 and open the same footage that you have already watched. This feels almost like walking in the real park where it is natural to get lost, given its expansive spread. You are allowed to go around the map at your own discretion and click on whatever you please and therefore making no two experiences the same. The open world of the story has been made possible by the application of new media in the practice of storytelling. The use of technology such as GPS

collar, interactive maps, park camera, user webcam in telling a story gives freedom to both the creator and the audience.

This digital story is one of the best examples of the technique of defamiliarization being adopted in the process of storytelling. The relation between man and the animal world is one that has been talked about frequently in the recent times but Bear 71 adopts a technique of giving a voice to the bear, quite literally. The use of maps of the park and allowing the user to navigate the map and a choice to follow Bear71 or any other animals gives a form of nonlinearity to the story. The user is allowed to make his own storyline though there is the constant narration of Bear 71 about her own story, the user is free to choose which footage he wants to see first other than just the three videos that play automatically and build their own parallel storyline and explore the world that Bear 71 is telling you about. This digital story cum documentary is evident of the intersection between our physical and digital selves both as a creator and user of these technologies. The physical terrain of the park was recreated digitally through the technology of Web VR and was built in Flashmultimedia application all accommodated within the interactive interface of the website. Bear 71 allows the user to go through a story of a bear and also explore the open world of Banff National Park. A user can enter the story through different access points which allows one to make his/her own narrative making the user, in part, a creator of his/her version of the story. This personalization made possible through digital technologies is a major contributing factor towards defamiliarizing the traditional structure of storytelling.

Digital Story #2 - Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek²

‘Snowfall’ is Pulitzer award-winning digital story by ‘The New York Times’ about the deadly avalanche which happened at Tunnel Creek in Washington state on February 19, 2012. The incident gathered high media attention because of the high profile of skiers involved in the accident. The event at the time was covered like any other disaster news until New York Times released an interactive digital story of the event 3 months after the accident. The backdrop of Tunnel creek provided the context of the story where the journey of the skiers through the disastrous event formed the plot of the story.

‘Snowfall’ is a story presented in six sections- Tunnel Creek, To the Peak, Descent begins, Blur of White, Discovery, Word Spreads. The sections are a breakdown of the different stages in the journey of the skiers. Each section reflects the skiers’ journey and their obstacles through a combination of text, images, videos, audio recordings and graphics all weaved together within the interactive interface of the website. The story weaved the journalistic material such as photographs, video procured from survivors’ cameras, testimonies of survivors, graphic designs into a multimodal narrative. New York Times Graphics Director, Steve Duenes in an interview explains the logic behind the creation of multimedia feature as “they were looking to find ways to create a seamless experience, so it didn’t feel like you were taking a detour, but the multimedia was part of the one narrative flow.”³ The integration of multimedia in the story thus defamiliarized not only the conventional presentation of a news story but also gave it a more humanistic touch through

² Digital story ‘*Snowfall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek*’ by John Branch can be accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/index.html#/?part=tunnel-creek>

³ “*How The New York Times' 'Snow Fall' project unifies text, multimedia*” by Jeff Sonderman published in ‘Poynter Online’ on December 20, 2012. (<https://www.poynter.org/news/how-new-york-times-snow-fall-project-unifies-text-multimedia>)

‘configuring’ human elements together with technological artefacts. The idea was to create an engaging narrative through creating an effective design. The re-telling of the event was realized through the non-linear organization of media which apart from contributing to the overall story structure were also complete stand-alone vital pieces of facts giving the user a first-hand account of the experience thus triggering an emotional response. Jeremy Rue, a teacher of media and journalism likens reader to an explorer while interacting with ‘Snowfall’ where “their power lies in the emotional response they trigger as you venture through the story — and I use “venture” intentionally because this is the feeling that it evokes.”⁴

The interactivity and multimodality of ‘Snowfall’ allows the user to immerse in the details of the event thus providing not only a richer experience but also a far more accurate details and in-depth understanding of the incident. Within days of release, the story received more than 3 million views. ‘Snowfall’ is a good example to show how the rendering of a news as digital story defamiliarized the conventional practice of news making and news consumption. The story was both re-created and re-told through multiple narratives merged within diverse mediums which brought increased awareness and participation through newer and innovative ways of expression.

Aesthetics of defamiliarization through making familiar unfamiliar aims to persuade users to chart out exploratory and novel ways to open new perspectives about the subject concerned. Stories have been an integral part of human culture and in recent times frequent intersections between our expressions and digital technology has spawned a multitude of art forms which exhibits and celebrates the plurality of material that a digital product can

⁴ “The ‘Snow Fall’ effect and dissecting the multimedia longform narrative” by Jeremy Rue published in ‘Multimedia-shooter’ on April 21, 2013. (<http://multimediasooter.com/wp/2013/04/21/the-snow-fall-effect-and-dissecting-the-multimedia-longform-narrative>)

incorporate. The complexity of digital medium lies in its continued deference of information and ironically there exists no story until and unless a user marks his own in and out points to create a text for oneself, which is fluid enough to be changed in the next sittings. The defamiliarization hence occurs with the whole traditional communication paradigm on both functional and perceptual level and although the functional familiarity keeps increasing about the medium but given the present rate of technological development, the functional and aesthetical unfamiliarity with the digital medium will continue to play an important role in creation and presentations of stories in future.

Works Cited

1. Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.
2. Brecht, Bertolt. "On Chinese Acting." *The Tulane Drama Review* (1961): 130-136.
3. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Biographia Literaria." *Norton Anthology*. Ed. M.H Abrams. WW Norton & Co, 2003. 384-406.
4. Laurel, Brenda. *Computers as Theatre*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing Co, 1991. Print.
5. Lister, Martin, et al. *New Media: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, 2009. Print.
6. Roland, C. "Digital stories in the classroom." *School Art* (2006): 26.
7. Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Twentieth Century Literary Theory - A Reader*. Ed. KM Newton. London: Palgrave, 1997. 3-5.
8. Waugh, Patricia, ed. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.